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Trokosi' - Slave of a Fetish: An Empirical Study

D.Y. Dzansi and P. Biga

*Department of Business Support studies, Faculty of Management Sciences,
Central University of Technology Free State, South Africa, 9301*

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ABSTRACT *Trokosi* meaning 'slave of a fetish' is an ancient cultural practice still in vogue among some tribes in parts of West Africa. It requires parents to offer their virgin daughters to serve as sex-slaves to fetish shrines in atonement for earlier sins committed by family members. Considered by opponents as outdated, apocalyptic, and outright human rights abuse, it is revered by adherents of the fetish system. In Ghana, the Trokosi law has officially abolished the practice but this has not deterred adherents. Combining literature study, participant observation and in-depth interviews with three key stakeholders in a southern part of Ghana, the study investigated the abusive nature of *Trokosism*, its effects on the 'liberated', and how to effectively combat it. The results suggest that the 'liberated' *Trokosi* were subjected to both physical and emotional abuse and denial of basic needs and rights. It however seems that the practice is abating. Since *Trokosism* (the *Trokosi* system) is based upon deep-seated beliefs, the most realistic strategy to combat it would be to educate practitioners and communities on human rights as well as through negotiation.

INTRODUCTION

Despite widespread outrage, condemnation and national and international prohibitions, incidents bothering on abuse of women's human rights continue to pervade Ghanaian society. An empirical study by Biney (2010) found that women abuse is rife in Ghana. The study found sexual abuse to be the most prevalent form of women abuse in Ghana. Most importantly, the study also found that generally, the perpetrators did not have any valid reasons for their actions. A poignant story illustrates this sentiment. Not too long ago, a young lady was shot dead in a village in Ghana right before on looking relatives by her jilted ex-lover just for breaking the relationship! According to community elders, there had never been an incident of that nature in the long history of the village. Unfortunately, as Essel (2013) allude to, incidents of women abuse as in the case narrated above does not seem to be getting any better in Ghana. More alarmingly, The Arc Foundation-Ghana (2014) reported that in Ghana, 95% of abused women do not report such incidents. Yet the consequences of gender based abuse can be devastating for individuals and society at large if the phenomenon is not studied, understood and checked. Essel (2013)

succinctly captures the consequences of women abuse as follows:

"...A victim finds it difficult to mingle with relatives, friends and the public at large for fear they will know about her predicament. This isolation has its own devastating effects such as depression, stress, fear, low self-esteem and even emotional/psychological problems. It also hinders her from participating in public life.... Their contributions towards building the economy of the nation are cut off...limits the educational opportunities and achievements of girls... undermines human rights, social stability and security, public health, women's educational and employment opportunities and the well-being and development prospects of children and communities."

Based on these and other dire consequences of women abuse, the current study on *Trokosism* an ancient cultural practice that requires parents to offer their virgin daughters to serve as sex-slaves to fetish shrines in atonement for earlier sins committed by family members is very important.

Problem Background

As Outhred (2011) intimate, in communities where customs and traditions are strongly held, treating women as objects like the case of the young lady narrated above is often done with the belligerent belief in the supremacy of 'tradition'. But traditions that cause undue pain or suffering cannot be tolerated under any circum-

Address for correspondence:
Dr. D.Y. Dzansi
Professor
Cell: +27806042292,
Fax: +27515073869,
E-mail: ddzansi@cut.ac.za

stance in today's world. It is therefore understandable that public sentiment in Ghana is against *Trokosism* - a traditional cultural practice that requires parents to offer their virgin daughters to serve as sex-slaves to shrine priests under the guise name of *wives of the gods*. It is even more ironical that despite the popular Ghanaian adage "dance according to the tune of the drum," which when literally translated means one must change according to the times, a male chauvinistic cultural practice like *Trokosism* that does not fit anymore into this modern world continues to be practiced amongst some tribes in Ghana. It must be noted that the practice is not limited to only Ghana. In fact, Hess (2014) found that the practice can be found in other West African countries such as Benin, Togo and Nigeria. Whether or not *Trokosism* occurs elsewhere besides Ghana is not the issue for this research. Rather, the worrying part of *Trokosism* is that, it is happening in a country (Ghana) that is a signatory to virtually all existing international declarations that prohibit any form of abuse of fundamental human rights. It is to be noted that *Trokosism* was officially outlawed in Ghana in 1998. It is also noteworthy that fundamental human rights is a right that unequivocally and inalienably bestows upon mankind the right to dignity. Put differently, the right to dignity is one that should never be taken away even in the worst of times. True, crime (or sin in the Christian parlance) and punishment are same bedfellows but some punishments have attracted condemnation in the postmodernist era. For instance, a person losing limbs, ears, noses, lips and so on as punishment for some crime (sin) committed have been widely condemned. Some traditional punitive practices besides *Trokosism* that still exist in rural parts of the Volta Region of Ghana can be quite bizarre if not outrageous. One cultural practice that readily comes to mind is where upon death, a corpse is dragged through the streets of the village with all kinds of humiliation for being a witch or wizard during one's lifetime. Whilst one might be tempted to argue that the punishment is being meted out to a lifeless body, it needs to be understood that even corpses deserve some dignity! Otherwise, how does one explain expensive caskets and tombstones? In this paper, attempt is made to understand from the perspective of both "perpetrator" and "victim", *Trokosism* - a system through which punishment is meted out to

young and always innocent girls who naturally have much to live for if only they had not been incarcerated.

Objectives of the Study

Combining literature analysis, participant observation and in-depth interviews with ex-*Trokosis* and high priests of shrines in a southern part of the Volta Region of Ghana, the study was conducted to:

- ♦ Unmask the abusive nature of *Trokosism* from the perspective of ex-*Trokosis*;
- ♦ Understand the attitude of shrine priests towards *Trokosism*;
- ♦ Find effective ways of eradicating *Trokosism*;

Perspective on *Trokosism*

Nature of Trokosism

Etymologically, *Trokosi*, a combination of two Ewe words 'tro' (deity) and 'kosi' (slave) therefore, meaning slave of a deity is one of the most ancient practices still found among rural communities of West Africa (Gadri 2010; Mensah and Godwyll 2010; Nicholas 2011). Numerous renowned scholars on the subject including Hess (2014), Akaba and Kudu (2011), Out-hred (2011), Mensah and Godwyll (2010), as well as organisations such as International Needs Ghana (2007) and UNICEF (2002) view *Trokosism* as a ritual bondage. In the *Trokosi* system, under the guise of *wives of the gods* (Hess 2014), virgins (normally female youth) are committed to shrines as reparation for the sins of their forbearer relatives.

Generally, it is a common belief among Africans that when a person commits a grave sin, the gods take revenge either by killing or visiting calamities on members of that person's family. Once an offence is reported to a deity through the shrine priest who is after that called upon to intercede, the shrine priest usually prescribes that the family gives a virgin to the deity to atone for the sin or offence committed (Gadri 2010). The virgin is next initiated into the system and bonded into a spiritual marriage with the deity. She thus becomes a slave of the deity, though euphemistically she is called the deity's wife. She remains in the shrine serving the priest and other functionaries of the deity for a period rang-

ing from a few years to life and is often used as the sexual partner of the priest. In some of the worst cases, even after the slave's death, another girl from the family has to replace her. Anybody who defiles a Trokosi commits an offence punishable severely through the same system (Gadri 2010).

Nukunya (2003) captures the harsh realities of Trokosis in the following manner:

"Life in the shrine is a hard one that is full of taboos, restrictions and injunctions. Apart from the domestic chores, she has to perform, the Trokosi works for the priest without any form of remuneration could not leave the shrine even for the farm without permission, while sex, except with the priest, is a complete taboo."

Nukunya (2003) goes on to intimate that frequent punishment is a normal experience of the Trokosi with the most common forms of punishment being the denial of food and whipping for offences like refusal to accede to sex, quarrelling, insulting others, refusal to run errands, leaving for the market or farm without permission, running away to parents, eating farm produce without permission and many other reasons.

Origins of the Trokosi System

The origin of *Trokosism* is shrouded in mystery, tradition, and obscurity with several accounts of its origin (Gadri 2010). According to Gadri (2010), the practice seems to have originated in Togo, Benin and South-Western Nigeria as a war ritual in the 1600's. However, he did not rule out the possibility of it having originated as a form of administration of justice, law and order. History has it that before going into combat, warriors would visit shrines where they offered young virgins and women to the war gods in exchange for victory and safe homecoming (Gadri 2010). Another account has it that the origin could be traced to the practice of paying deities for services rendered. According to Gadri (2010), clients would consult deities for one reason or the other and made payments for services in cash, cattle, sheep, goats and poultry. Later on, those who were particularly satisfied started to offer their children - usually girls to serve the gods in appreciation for work done. On other occasions, people who were about to undertake highly important venture or needed something badly would promise to offer their daughters to the deities if their ventures were success-

ful (Gadri 2010). From these accounts, it would seem as if the practice started as a voluntary action. But as rightly observed by Ammah et al. (2013), from its voluntary beginnings, compulsion crept in and the voluntary aspect virtually disappeared.

The Liberation Campaign

While Churches and other religious institutions have been very vocal in condemning the Trokosi system, it is important that the anti *Trokosism* campaign should not be seen as a conflict between Christianity and Islam and traditional religion. Rather, it is more a fight between freedom and human right abuses, between dignity and degradation of womanhood, and finally between fairness and miss carriage of justice.

International Needs Ghana (2007) perhaps the most vociferous anti *Trokosism* organization in Ghana maintains that the *Trokosi* system has given rise to human rights problems such as: gender discrimination – for it is mostly the women who are sent to the shrine; physical abuse – *Trokosis* are forced into bed by the priest; child abuse – children born of these affairs do not go to school; spiritual bondage – Trokosi did not have the freedom to choose their own religion shared at the dissemination workshop and many other human rights problems. It has therefore launched a series of activities at quite substantial costs to set free those they regard as being in bondage. It is important to acknowledge here that most of the "liberated" interviewees in this study owe their freedom to International Needs Ghana. This singular acknowledgement should not detract from the fact that other organisations, including Churches and individuals are also active anti *Trokosism* campaigners in Ghana.

A Brief Cultural Perspective on Trokosi System

As mentioned in the earlier part of this paper, *Trokosism* is an age-old cultural practice. According to Nwoke (2013), culture refers to the set of shared values, attitudes, customs, and physical objects that are maintained by people in a specific setting as part of a design for living one's daily life. As stated earlier, *Trokosism* is a cultural practice found in many West African rural areas but there are suggestions that it ex-

ists in many other rural regions around the world. For Sarpong (1974), to adherents, and in fact, a few Christian religious denominations like the Afrikania Church, Trokosi system is a real and ideal culture while to organizations such as International Needs Ghana, it is an outdated cultural practice that is no longer ideal.

Trokosism as a cultural practice invokes the need to reflect upon the word practice. In ordinary everyday usage, the word practice may refer to the usual or expected way of doing or going about a particular thing in a particular organization or situation or community. Practice can also mean something that is done on a regular basis. Simply put, practice means a habit or custom. *Trokosism* as a cultural practice can therefore be seen as a habit; the usual, accepted and in fact, expected way of atoning for someone else's sins in communities that view it as a custom and therefore, such adherents may find nothing wrong with it. In fact, for adherents, it simply means one rewarding or paying the gods or deities for the services rendered. To some, however, this practice is not right. This invokes the need to reflect on what is right. The Oxford Concise English Dictionary provides an insightful definition on the word right.

"Right is morally or socially correct, fair treatment, a thing one may legally or morally claim". We have both natural and legal right. Natural law are given by nature, legal right are given to people by law. Human rights are "rights held to be justifiably belonging to any person and also rights which is generally considered all people should have" (Oxford Concise English Dictionary).

Whether right or not right, there is no doubt that in today's world that there is just no room for individuals groups, classes, or nations to practice what others see as oppressive. In this study, it is argued that regardless of whether some in society may regard a situation where a young unwilling girl may have to undergo servitude for someone else's sins as right, there are others who may view the same act as unfair, unjust, abusive and denial of basic human right. In fact, quite recently, Okoampa-Ahoofe (2014) reminded us of the human rights abuse side of Trokosism as "a *slavo-parasitic* practice that systematically robs the victims of their self-worth, and self-esteem, often leading to suicidal thoughts.

A Brief Religious Perspective on Trokosism

Trokosism is a practice that has despite being loathed by many for basic human rights abuse, continues in Mensah and Godwyll's (2010) words to "marginalizes, dehumanizes and treats young virgins as slaves consecrated to the gods". From a religion point of view, *Trokosism* appears as a tussle between the traditional African religion on the one hand and all other religions on the other hand. Whilst traditionalists like the shrine priests and the Afrikania church in Ghana continue to adore and defend *Trokosism*, all other religious formations in Ghana have been very unequivocal in condemning the practice. Fundamentally, opposition to *Trokosism* is somewhat based on religion. Religious opposition to Trokosism is based on the unwavering conviction that human right is *sacred* hence needs to be protected at all cost. So, from a religious point of view no offence should attract the retribution of denial of one's right to dignity and denial of fundamental human rights – including the right not to be a *Trokosi*.

METHODOLOGY

This study is about cultural anthropology – an area that deals with among others, local cultural realities. The study investigated the cultural practice, *Trokosism* to comprehend its abusive nature, its effects on the 'liberated' Trokosi, and how to help eradicate it. The study captured the voices of the Trokosi 'victims' on the one hand, and those of the 'faithful' - adherents of *Trokosism* on the other hand. The aim was to understand from all perspectives, *Trokosism*, an issue that bothers on human rights abuse of women. As a women issue, the study is a Feminist research, an area that in the words of (Sarantakos 2012) has "emerged as a legitimate, relevant, popular and contemporary research model. Its quality, and the validity of its findings are beyond contention, and over the years, it has produced a significant output that has provided guidelines for policies central to modern societies." Sarantakos (2012) insightfully presented the usefulness of the Feminist approach to research as follows:

...Its domain is wide and diverse, and so are its basic methodological principles. Feminist research is a type of inquiry that deserves its place in this text not primarily because of the nature of

methods it employs or the output it produces but rather because of the manner in which it uses conventional methods, the areas on which it focuses, and the manner in which it employs its findings. In this sense, Feminist research is an emancipatory type of inquiry. This means that it not only documents aspects of reality; it also takes a personal, political and engaging stance to the world (Sarantakos 2012).

From the above statements, Sarantakos (2012) makes it quite clear that feminist research approaches the scientific process with the understanding that social phenomenon is subjectively constructed hence best understood from the personal accounts of the actors themselves. Thus, in this research it is argued that for a better understanding of *Trokosism* - a socio cultural phenomenon, it is best to be guided by the constructionist lenses. This philosophical position allowed the limited investigator involvement in the data gathering process where one of the researchers spent three weeks in the shrines observing the Trokosis and interviewing the priests in order to understand a system that has been shrouded in secrecy for so long.

Considering the objectives of the research, it was prudent to use a case study approach since a case study is an intensive study geared toward a thorough understanding of a given social unit. This collective unit may be a family a group of individuals, a community or an institution. This case study was conducted within a West African community on Trokosi system as a traditional/cultural practice.

Data Collection

The community chosen for data collection is by nature religious with about 26 groups of which traditional religion is very strong. This particular community was chosen because despite the many Christian religions, the people from the area are firmly rooted in the belief in Tro (deity) which they say has super powers and can do anything at any time. Besides, there are many shrines in the area some of which still practice *Trokosism*. Four shrines that are particularly noted for practicing *Trokosism* system were chosen in the study. Another compelling reason for choosing the area is that many of the liberated Trokosi are from this community so it was easy to access them.

Two groups of participants interviewed. The first group was made up of four (2) priests from each of the four shrines making a total of eight (8) shrine priests. The second group consisted of 10 liberated slaves that were identified after much effort. So, in all, 18 people were interviewed. Whilst one on one in-depth interviews were held with the 8 shrine priests in the shrines, for the purpose of anonymity, the interviews with the 10 liberated Trokosis took place in private and at locations far away from the shrines. When it became quite clear at an early stage that the Trokosis still in bondage were not going to give reliable information, the decision was made to observe them as they carried out their activities in the shrine. A diary was kept for the purpose of recording observations.

Ethical Consideration

It is important for a study like this to take proper precautions. This research has to do with human beings. Therefore, one had to abide by certain basic ethical standards. First of all, permission was sought from the chief of the village and the priests of the four shrines. The researchers also took time at the beginning of the interview to let the participants understand their rights, including: the right to respond or not to respond to any question that they might find uncomfortable. However, they were encouraged to be open, frank and to answer the questions very briefly and precisely as much as possible. Moreover, participants were made to understand that their responses would be treated with confidentiality and anonymity. As we can see, throughout this paper, one cannot associate a particular issue that can be said to be derogatory or offensive to a region, community, or individual.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is consider convenient to present the findings under three categories namely *committal of the sin/offence, initiation, and servitude*.

Offences of Committal: The research revealed that the Trokosis were brought to the shrines for various offences one that is referred to in this study as offences of committal. These offences to include: theft, adultery, murder, falsehood, land litigation and disputes, non-payment of debts, replacement of an already existing line

of Trokosi (Ammah et al. 2013). Consistent with Akaba and Kudu (2011), the findings show that in all cases, the actual offender is normally a relation to the victim used to atone for the offence. Sanctions (restitution or punishment if you like) starts as soon as the offender owns up or is caught. There are instances where offenders refuse to own up or are not caught. In such situations, the aggrieved party may make appeals to the shrine priest for them to invoke the power from the gods to find the culprit. According to Ewe oral tradition, where the power from the gods is invoked, it often leads to the devastating repercussion of the deity beginning a campaign of death in the family of the culprit. All the shrine priests attested to this. The Ewe oral tradition goes on that family or community members will keep dying until the culprit admits his/her fault. Further, the calamities in the family would only stop when a young virgin girl is brought into servitude in the shrine (Hess 2014; Akaba and Kudu 2011; Outhred 2011). This was again confirmed by the resident priests. Majority of the Trokosis said they believed these assertions because they had witnessed relatives dying untimely and unnatural deaths. These affirmations go a long way in perpetuating the mythical part of *Trokosism*.

Initiation: In agreement to Akaba and Kudu (2011) observation and interview results showed that committal rites included initiation, confinement, puberty and partial or total release. The rites begin with consultation with the shrine priest. Where someone is seeking retribution, this consultation leads to invocation of a curse by the one offended and or declaration of an object of reparation. Where the culprit has been identified the culprit's family responds by presenting a virgin girl to the shrine. As reported by Wisdom and Godwyll (2010), the Trokosis are expected to bring along own items such as cooking utensils, buckets, combs and sleeping mats – in fact, everything that a woman would need. The ritual of committal is performed by the priest and other functionaries at the shrine. According to the priests, the aim is to induct the Trokosi into the shrine, which it is believed could make her a faithful and dedicated devotee. However, after interviewing the Trokosis it emerged that the main reason could be to prevent them from running away. The Trokosis revealed that they were made to believe that any attempt to escape after the administration of concoctions

during the initiation would result in unimaginable suffering, including madness. According to the Trokosis sanctions for deviance are meticulously enumerated to them and their parents during initiation. This version was also confirmed by the priests who felt they had the right to impose sanctions. As a mark of identification, the Trokosi unfailingly had their hair shaved and wore gray-bath or calico cloth with raffia around their neck. Information gathered from the study which was corroborated by both priest and Trokosi revealed that, the Trokosi had to observe a number of taboos. For instance, a Trokosi is forbidden to wear shoes and clothes other than those prescribed for her Trokosi status. Surely then, Okoampa-Ahoofe (2014) was quite right in describing Trokosis as a *slavo-parasitic* practice that systematically robs the victims of their self-worth, and self-esteem.

Life at the Shrine (ex-Trokosi accounts): One liberated Trokosi summed up the life of Trokosi during servitude. According to the ex-Trokosi who for reasons of anonymity is simply referred to as Georgina, a Trokosis rendered several services while in servitude. In Georgina's own words:

I did domestic and other services to the priest.

My duties included the performance of domestic chores such as cooking, washing, sweeping, fetching water and taking care of visitors.

On a regular basis, had to do farm work.

More often than not, I worked from dawn to dusk sometimes without food.

At times while in the farm, we lived on palm kernel or ate pepper and drunk water on it as food.

I was never remunerated, neither did I ever get a share in the farm produce of my labour.

The priests had absolute sexual control over us, which often resulted in pregnancy and child bearing.

I may be free now but inside me, I feel hollow.

Worst still I am struggling to look after my "fatherless" three children (The Children of the gods!).

Georgina's statements illustrate how frustrating life even after liberation can be for the Trokosi. Georgina's accounts mirror views of Goltzman (1998), Aird (2007), Wiking (2009), Hess (2014), Okoampa-Ahoofe (2014) and several others who all claimed that the *Trokosis* were sub-

jected to maltreatment such as hard labour, forced sexual intercourse with shrine priest and other hardships. If in freedom, Georgina feels so helpless, for those still in bondage one can only guess their mental and physical state.

Life at the Shrine (Daily Observations): very little was observed. Frankly, one did not expect to get much information. We understood right from the beginning that the *Trokosis* could not reasonably be expected to say much since in all probability, they would be apprehensive of being labelled traitors. However, from the body languages, one could sense some weariness, distress and lack of enthusiasm in what they did in the shrine.

Life at the Shrine (Shrine Priest Accounts): Regarding the priests, it is clear they felt justified in their acts. The priests interviewed were unanimous on their part in denying subjecting the *Trokosi* to hard labour. They also unanimously rejected the notion that the *Trokosis* were not properly fed. They instead claimed that the system had actually saved the *Trokosis* and their families from certain death that was bound to happen had they not come into the shrine as *Trokosis* in atonement of sins of family members. Therefore, any hardships they the *Trokosis* claim to be undergoing or have undergone was a blessing. To the priest, the *Trokosi* are like priestesses who copulate with the gods through their earthy servants, the priests. They, therefore, saw nothing wrong in their sexual acts. Strangely, the priest did not seem to begrudge the *Trokosis* for accusing them of hardships. Instead, one of the priests jokingly (or is it sarcastically?) commented: who says a prisoner would ever think well of a wader even if the prisoner was incarcerated for murder? Luckily, the study revealed that the practice is abating. The shrine priest confirmed that compared to the distant past, the number of current inmate *Trokosis* are considerably few.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the researchers used interpretivism as the research approach knowing very well that it is prone to criticism for lacking *scientific rigor* and even labelled as 'bad reasoning' by those who unwaveringly subscribe to positivism. The basis for such judgement is always that, interpretivism is too subjective. Subjective this research may be but it needs to be noted

that right from the outset it was made clear that the research goal was to understand the personal meanings that the participants as individuals attach to their experiences of *Trokisism*. On that basis, these subjective views should not be seen as a limitation that devalues the worth of the study. On the contrary, the personal viewpoints should be seen as making a vital contribution to the understanding of *Trokisism* because through the subjectivist's lenses, the victims were able to "tell it as it happened to them" and the perpetrators also *justified* why they do what they have been doing - something that positivism/objectivist approach would not be able to achieve.

It is clear that those opposed to *Trokosism* believe the practice has outlived its time. In fact, it is seen as an ancient practice that has no place in postmodernist era. Whilst there is every sense in offenders being apprehended and punished, those opposed to *Trokosism* believe it is completely unacceptable to hold an innocent young girl accountable for the misdeeds of older relatives. In spite of the denials by the shrine priests, the findings compel one to conclude that *Trokosis* are abused both physically and emotionally and denied basic needs and rights when in servitude.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As indicated by some previous writers, it came across that it will be counterproductive therefore unwise to use "force" as a means of eradicating the practice of *Trokosism*. The reason is that, since *Trokosism* is ages old and is based upon deep-seated beliefs and value systems, eradicating it will not be all that easy when one considers that cultural practices "die hard". It is therefore recommended that the most realistic strategy to combat it would be to educate practitioners and communities on human rights alongside relying on negotiated release of those still in bondage.

So, all in all, society's work appears cut out. However, the fact that the practice appears to be abating brings some comfort. A further encouragement is the willingness of shrine priests to enter into negotiated release of *Trokosis* provided the right price is paid. This comes at a time when organisations such as International Needs Ghana (ING), Fetish Slaves Liberation Movement (FESLIM), the Commission of

Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) and the Ghana National Commission on Children (GNCC), and UNICEF just to mention a few have secured freedom for some Trokosis, through 'negotiation'.

For research purposes, it is recommend that attention is paid to identifying how best to deter parents and relatives from sending their own into *Trokosism*. Furthermore, because Trokosis like all cultural practices is so deep rooted in the communities, there will be reluctance on the part of adherents to let go easily. So, the task must be to determine what it will take for shrine priest and followers to stop the practice.

Last but not the least, in the course of this study, the literature search revealed mostly normative assertions with very few empirical studies. There is therefore need for new empirical study on the subject especially with regards to how best to stop the practice.

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